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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a general analysis of 40 episodes of The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show and 170 (of 179) episodes of I Love Lucy, both of which were aired on television during the 1950s. Character portrayals of the stars and supporting actors/actresses are described in detail and analyzed from the perspectives of gender and sex stereotypes as well as comedy and humor. In addition, both of the television (albeit real life) marriages are examined in terms of the personality dynamics, interactions, and tensions of/between the two spouses, and the two situation comedies (sitcoms) are then compared and contrasted to each other, once again from the standpoint of the major characterizations. The role of narrative (i.e., the embodiment of a political determinism in which women find a subordinate place) is disucssed in an attempt to discover how comedy works to contain women and how successfully it does so; and it is recommended that attention should be turned to theories of the comic and humor as they intersect narrative in order to explore this issue. The paper then turns to Freud's assessment of comic and humor when both the subject and the object are women. The discussion concludes with some reflections on Freud's construction of the radical underpinnings and "liberating" function of jokes, the comic, and humor, and the difficult problems of women's simulated liberation through comic containment. (21 end notes) (CGD)

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PATRICIA MELLENCAMP

SITUATION COMEDY, FEMINISM AND FREUD: DISCOURSES OF GRACIE AND LUCY

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Situation Comedy, Feminism and Freud:
Discourses of Gracie and Lucy

Patricia Mellencamp

Since we said "I do," there are so many things we don't.

Lucy Ricardo

This is a battle between two different ways of life, men and women.

The battle of the sexes?

Sex has nothing to do with it.

Gracie Allen and Blanche Morton

During the late 1940s and 50s, linked to or owned by the major radio networks, television recycled radio's stars, formats, and times through a little, proscenium screens, filling up the day. Vaudeville and movies fed both these voracious, domestic media, each reliant on sound, and each influential in the rapidly developing suburbs. With a commercial collage of quiz, news, music, variety, wrestling/boxing, fashion/cooking, and comedy shows, both media were relatively irreverant toward well-fashioned narrative and worshipful of audiences and sponsors. TV was then (and continues to be) an ecology--a repetition and recycling through years--and a family affair, in the 1950s conducted collectively in the living room, the dial dominated by

Dad. A TV set was a status symbol, a rooftop economic declaration, and an invitation to other couples to watch.

Like suburban owners of TV "sets," the four television networks were also concerned with status; thus "the news" was made a separate category of the real and legitimate, presumably distinct from "entertainment." At the beginning of the 1950s, the UN debates were prestigiously broadcast. The proceedings of the Kefauver congressional committee, investigating organized crime, were televised by WPIX in New York; the networks carried these "real life" dramas with good ratings. In April, 1951, General Douglas MacArthur's speech to Congress was broadcast; his words attacked the "containment" and limited warfare policies of the Truman administration, revving up the paranoiac or conspiracy interpretation of not only world but also social events. In July, 1952, the GOP convention was televised, and Stevenson and Eisenhower fought part of the subsequent election on TV. The Army-McCarthy hearings began on April 22, 1954 and received high ratings for the many hours during which Senator Joseph McCarthy accused the military of "communist infiltration" and then was undone on live television.[1]

Coincident with these prestigious broadcasts of the "real"--events of power, politics, and "truth"--and the massive licensing of broadcast air and time, women were being urged to leave the city, work force, and salaries, move to the suburbs, leisure and tranquillity, raise children, and placate commuting, overworked husbands for free. In reality, of course, not all women did so. Most women over 35 remained in the paid work force; when allowed, instead of building battleships, they took other jobs. That TV and particularly situation comedies would, like radio, both serve and support the new, imaginary, blissful domesticity of a ranch style house, backyard barbeque, and a bath and a half, seems logical--it is, of course, historical. "Containment" was not only a defensive, military strategy developed as U.S.

foreign policy in the 1950s; it was practiced on the domestic front as well and aimed at excluding women from the work force and keeping them in the home.

To argue that television was a powerful machinery of familial containment of women is hardly original. Yet the specifics of program strategies are intriguing and complex, hardly monolithic or perfectly generic as most discourses presume. For me, two issues are central: the importance in early 1950s comedy of idiosyncratically powerful female stars usually in their late thirties or forties; and the gradual, erosion of that power that occurred in the representation of women within comedy formats. In situation comedy, pacification of women occurred between 1950 and 1960 without a single critical mention that the genre's terrain had altered: the housewife, although still ruling the familial roost, changed from being a humorous rebel or well-dressed, wise-cracking, naive dissenter who wanted or had a paid job--from being out of control via language (Gracie) or body (Lucy)--to being a contented, if not blissfully happy, understanding homebody (Laura Petrie). With this in mind, we need to re-view specific programs, particularly in TV's early stages. This paper is based on a general analysis of forty episodes of The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show, which was on the air Wednesday nights, from October, 1950 until June, 1958, when Gracie left the show, and of 170 of the 179 episodes of "I Love Lucy," which was broadcast Monday evenings from October, 1951 until May, 1957. It also begins to rethink Freud's construction of the radical underpinnings and "liberating" function of jokes, the comic, and humour--perhaps yet another "foreign" policy of potential containment for U.S. women.

I

In fifteen minute segments, broadcast live three times a week in 1949, Gertrude Berg, writer, producer and star, disguised herself as Molly Goldberg,

the quintessential Jewish mother, a version of chicken soup malaprops and advice. Leaning out her window she would intimately confess to us: "If Mr. Goldberg did not drink Sanka decaffeinated coffee, I don't know what I would do--I don't even know if we'd still have a marriage . . . just try it once, and that's what I'm telling you." The program and its popularity were emblematic of the subsequent televised avalanche of situation comedies, a direct descendant of radio, vaudeville's "husband and wife" sketches, music hall, and comedia del arte's stereotypical scenes and characters. The elision of program and star with sponsor was another version of television's corporate coupling/ownership.

In the 1950/51 season, The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show debuted, continuing in this tradition. Burns and Allen funneled their 1926 marriage, vaudeville, radio and film routines, and characters/stars into an upper-middle class situation comedy--an historical agglutination suggesting that what is monolithically termed "mass culture" is a process, a collection of discourses, scenes, or turns recycled from various media and contextualized within historical moments. Despite its similarity to the Molly Goldberg type of program, this show represented a new version of the happily married couple, featuring the zany, fashionable Gracie of bewildering non-sequiturs and the relaxed, dapper George of one-liners and wisecracks, living in suburban, affluent Beverly Hills. Gracie was certainly unlike T. V.'s nurturing-yet-domineering mothers who dwelled in city apartments. Yet she was familiarly different as "Gracie." Derailing the laws and syntax of language and logic, her rule was a referral back to either the nearest or the unexpected referent as a comic turn on the arbitrary and conventional authority of speech (and she would continually break her own rules just when her friends and we caught on). She baffled all the male, and most of the female characters, concocting improbable stories and schemes that were

invariably true in amazing circumlocutions which became that week's "plot."

The casual narratives of each week's program were used merely as continuity for vaudeville routines and existed primarily to be mocked by George. The scenario was often as follows: an ordinary event--shopping, going to the movies--would be "misinterpreted" and then complicated by Gracie, who would then connect a second, random event to the first. For example, their college son, Ronnie, needs a story for the USC newspaper; Blanche Morton, her next-door neighbor and confidante, wants new dishes. Linking these two unrelated problems, Gracie contrives a fake theft of Ronnie's wealthy friend's car. When the car is initially found in the Morton's garage, Blanche's husband is so relieved not to have to pay for this "new" car, which he believes Blance has bought, that he gladly buys the plates; and Ronnie scoops the story of the theft.

Adding to the shaggy dog quality of the plots were the many bewildered characters (including the postman) who would drop by the house and then be involved by Gracie. The more unrelated the character, or innocent bystander, to the plot, the better; a large measure of Gracie's comedy depended on other characters' astonishment; her naive, friendly non-sequiturs rendered them speechless, reluctantly agreeing, finally reduced to staring in reaction shots. (This is diametrically the opposite of what occurs in "I Love Lucy" where Lucy is invariably given the last word or look, the editing indicating that different mechanisms of identification and spectator positioning are operative in each show.) Then, winking, George would either join in the linguistic mayhem or sort things out. His intervention was not, however, for our understanding, but for the confused, speechless characters; his Aristotelian analyses of Gracie's behavior and illogic left bystanders doubly amazed. Finally, at the end of each show, George would issue the imperative, "Say goodnight Gracie."

Garbed in dressy, fifties fashion amidst an upper-middle class decor of dens, patios, and two-car garages, constantly arranging flowers or making and serving coffee but not sense, Gracie equivocally escaped order. Despite being burdened by all the cliches applied to women--illogical, crazy, nonsensical, possessing their own, peculiar bio-logic and patronized accordingly--in certain ways, she seemed to be out of (or beyond) men's control. Unlike the ever loyal and bewildered Harry VonZell, the series and the story's announcer, and other characters in the narrative sketches, neither she nor her neighbor Blanche, who both loved and understood Gracie, revered George or were intimidated by his cleverness; in fact, Gracie rarely paid attention to him or any authority figure. She unmade decorum, she unraveled patriarchal laws, illustrating Jean Baudrillard's assertion through Freud: "The witticism, which is a transgressive reversal of discourse, does not act on the basis of another code as such; it works through the instantaneous deconstruction of the dominant discursive code. It volatizes the category of the code, and that of the message.[2] The "dominant discursive code" of patriarchy tried, through benevolent George, to contain Gracie's volatization, her literal deconstruction of speech, and her tall tales of family. Whether or not the system won can perhaps be answered either way, depending on where the analyst is politically sitting--with George in his den, or in the kitchen, with women.

Gracie's forte was the shaggy dog story--either as verbal riff or as the very substance of the narrative: the first use led to illogical nonsense, a way of thinking definitive of Gracie's comedy; the second to instigation and resolution of the week's episode. Furthermore, the shaggy dog event preposterous as it was, would always prove to be "true." Take for example, the following episode. The scene is Gracie's sunny, ruffle-curtained kitchen with table in the center, an auto-replenishing coffee pot, and numerous exits. The initial situation is explicated in the dialogue:

Gracie: Thanks for driving me home Dave.

Dave: As long as I towed your car in, I didn't mind at all Mrs. Burns.

Gracie: There's some coffee on the stove. Would you like some?

Dave: I've been wondering, Mrs. Burns. How are you going to explain this little repair job to your husband?

Gracie: I'll just tell him what happened. I went shopping and bought a blouse and on my way home I stopped to watch them put up the tents and this elephant came along and sat on my fender and smashed it.

Dave: He'll never believe it.

Gracie: Of course he will. He knows a fender isn't strong enough to hold up an elephant. George is smarter than you think he is.[3]

To prove her story to George, Gracie will show him the blouse. Her idiosyncratic cause-effect connections have nothing (or everything) to do with physics or the arbitrary conventions of language or common sense. In many ways, her style of speech is uncommonly funny because it is ahistorical, ignoring the speaker and the situation while obeying language's rules. Like Chico Marx, she takes language literally; unlike Chico, she is unaware of her effect on other characters.[4] Gracie delivers her deadpan lines without reaction or expectation, obliviously using the same expressive tone no matter what the terms of the discursive contract--which she ultimately reconstructs anyway. The rest of this episode consists of retelling the story--first to Blanche, who then tells her husband, Harry; then to the insurance salesman, Prescott; and simultaneously to Harry VonZell and Stebbins, the circus man.

George, basically a solo, narrative entrepreneur, keeps breaking and entering Gracie's dilemma of credulity with comments over ("All I wanted was a little proof"), observations on life, and ironic maxims about marriage: "Married people don't have to lie to each other. We've got lawyers and friends to do that for us." George bribes Gracie with a promise of a mink coat for the "true" story, which, of course, she has already told him. The show culminates in a final courtroom scene with all of the participants sitting in the Burns' living room validating the truth of Gracie's initial story, which is confirmed by Dave, the "seeing is believing" mechanic. The truth of male vision verifying Gracie's words is endlessly repeated, in the series and in this program. Dave says, "If I hadn't come down to the circus grounds to tow away your car, I wouldn't have believed it myself." During the last scene, he reiterates: "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it myself." During this conclusive trial, presided over by George, a new character, Duffy Edwards, the furrier, enters with Gracie's newly won fur coat and says to George: "I always watch your show. I knew you were going to lose." Unlike Lucy, Gracie always wins in the narrative, which thereby validates her story.

However, other codes are also operative: George is center-framed in the mise-en-scene and by the moving camera; he is taller than all the other characters; and he has access to the audience via his direct looks at the camera. He nods knowingly, with sidelong collusive glances at us (or perhaps eternal husbands everywhere). In the end Gracie is frame left. She wins the narrative and the mink coat but loses central screen space; and perhaps most importantly, she never was in possession of "the look." Roland Barthes, placing power firmly in language, asks: "Where is speech? In locution? In listening? In the returns of the one and the other? The problem is not to abolish the distinctions in functions . . . but to protect the

instability . . . the giddying whirls of the positions of speech."[5] The whirls are giddying, yet George Burns, the dapper entertainer as Hollywood gossip, critic, and golf partner of CBS president, William Paley, presides over the show with benign resignation, a wry smile, and narrative "logic" firmly grounded in bemused knowledge of the frothy status of the situation, comedy, and television. Throughout each program, Gracie is blatantly dominated not only by George's looks at the camera and direct monologues to the TV audience, but by his view of the program from the TV set in his den, or his figure matted or superimposed over the background action as his voice-over comments on marriage, Gracie, her relatives, movie stars, show business, and the "story."

In his analysis of Freud's Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Samuel Weber suggests an intriguing reading of the Aufsitzer, or Shaggy Dog jokes--nonsense jokes which create the expectation of a joke, causing one to search for concealed meaning. "But one finds none, they really are nonsense," writes Freud. Weber argues that the expectation consists in the desire "to make sense of the enigmatic assertion with which the joke begins . . . such jokes 'play' games with the desire of the listener. . . . By rousing this 'expectation' and then leaving it unsatisfied . . . such jokes function in a manner very reminiscent of the discourse of the analyst, who refuses to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the analysand."[6] It is, however, difficult to apply Weber's insight to Gracie, to compare her rather than George to the analyst. After all, it is George with whom the listener is in collusion, George who hears Gracie from his tolerant, central, bemused vantage point. It is as if he occupies the central tower in the panopticon, or the analyst's chair behind the couch, unseen, with all scenes visible to his gaze.

As Weber writes, these jokes are "come-ons," taking us for a ride. "For at the end of the road all we find is nonsense: 'They really are nonsense,'

Freud states, thus seeking to reassure us, and himself as well."[7] Perhaps Burns and Allen could be interpreted as a massive, male reassurance that women's lives are indeed nonsense. The Aufsitzer is a joke played on the expectation of a joke, and clearly a complicated matter--in the case of Gracie Allen, it is a refusal of conventional meaning gleefully accepted and encouraged as rebellion by Blanche Morton and contained for the audience by the omniscience of George who narcissistically strives, as super/ego, to "unify, bind . . . and situate [himself] as a self-contained subject."[8]

Nor should we be misled by the fact that George is the "straight man" and thus seems to occupy a slightly inferior position, which he himself describes as follows:

> For the benefit of those who have never seen me, I am what is known in the business as a straight man. If you don't know what a straight man does, I'll tell you. The comedian gets a laugh. Then I look at the comedian. Then I look at the audience--like this . . . That is known as a pause . . .
>
> Another duty of a straight man is to repeat what the comedian says. If Gracie should say, "A funny thing happened on the streetcar today," then I say, "A funny thing happened on the street-car today?" And naturally her answer gets a scream. Then, I throw in one of my famous pauses . . .

But George was never just a straight man; the monologue continues:

> I've been a straight man for so many years that from force of habit I repeat everything. I went out fishing with a fellow the other

day and he fell overboard. He yelled "Help! Help!" So I said, "Help? Help?" And while I waiting for him to get his laugh, he drowned.

This gag defines quite precisely George's actions, as well as indicating their vaudeville origins. Inevitably, like the male leads in most situation comedies, he got the final and controlling look or laugh. Containment operated through laughter--a release which might have held women to their place, rather than "liberating" them in the way Freud says jokes do for their tellers and auditors. As radical as the nonsense joke might be (when it comes from the mouth of the male), it's different, as is the rest of life, for the female speaker. The audience too is measured and contained by George whom both the camera and editing follow: the husband as TV critic, solo stand-up comic, female psychologist, and tolerant parent/performer. Yet, unlike ~~in~~ most situation comedies, it was clear that George depended on Gracie who worked both in the series' imaginary act and the program's narratives. Thus, the contradiction of the program and the double bind of the female spectator and comedian--both subject and object of the comedy, rather than being the mere objects that they are in the Freudian paradigm of jokes; these are dilemmas which, for me, no modern critical model can resolve.

II

In its original version, "I Love Lucy" debuted Monday, October 15, 1951, at 8:00 p.m. Held to the conventional domesticity of situation comedy, Lucy Ricardo was barely in control, constantly attempting to escape domesticity--her "situation," her job, in the home--always trying to get into show business by getting into Ricky's "act," narratively fouling it up, but brilliantly and comically performing in it. Lucy endured marriage and housewifery by transforming them into vaudeville: costumed performances and

rehearsals which made staying home frustrating yet tolerable. Her dissatisfaction, expressed as her desire for a job, show business and stardom, was concealed by the happy endings of hug/kiss/ (sometimes tagged with the line, "now we're even") applause/titles/theme song. Her discontent and ambition, literally and weekly stated, were the show's working premises, its contradictions massively covered up by the audience's pleasure in her performances, her "real" stardom. The series enacts the paradox of women and comedy, the female performer caught somewhere between narrative and spectacle, historically held as a simulation between the real and the model.

As was the case with The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show, the entire series was biographically linked to the marriage of the two stars. Thus, Lucille Ball, movie star, and her husband Desi Arnaz, Cuban band leader, became Lucy and Ricky Ricardo; their "friends" appeared on programs as bit players or "themselves." At the end of one episode, for instance, the voice-over announcer says: "Harpo Marx played himself." Image/person/star are totally merged as "himself," the "real" is a replayed image, a scene, a simulation--what Jean Baudrillard calls "the hyperreal." The most extraordinary or bizarre example of the elision of "fact" and fiction, or the "real" with the simulation, martialled by the "formal coherency" of narrative, was Lucy's hyperreal pregnancy. In 1952, with scripts supervised by a minister, a priest, and a rabbi, seven episodes were devoted to Lucy's TV and real pregnancy (without ever mentioning the word). The first was aired December 8, timed with Lucy's scheduled caesarean delivery date, Monday, January 19, 1953. Lucy's real, nine-month baby, Desi, Jr., was simulated in a seven-week, TV gestation, and electronically delivered on January 19 at 8:00 p.m. as Little Ricky, while 44 million Americans watched. (Only 29 million tuned in Eisenhower's swearing-in ceremony. We liked Ike. We loved Lucy.) As were all the episodes in the series, this one was given a children's book

title, "Lucy Goes to the Hospital."[9]

But if the "real" domestic and familial details of the star's life were so oddly mixed up with the fiction, perhaps the supreme fiction of the program was that Lucy was not star material and hence needed to be confined to domesticity. Thus the weekly plot concerned Lucy's thwarted attempts to break out of the home and into show business. Unlike Gracie's implausible connections and overt machinations, though, all of Lucy's schemes fail, even if failure necessitates an instant and gratuitous reversal in the end. Lucy was the rebellious child whom the husband/father Ricky endured, understood, loved, and even, on occasion, punished, as, for example, when he spanked her on account of her continual disobedience. However, if Lucy's plots for ambition and fame narratively fail, with the result that she is held, often gratefully, to domesticity, performatively they succeed. In the elemental, repetitive narrative, Lucy doesn't get what she wants: a job and recognition. Weekly, for six years, she accepted domesticity, only to try to escape the next week. During each program, however, she not only succeeded, but demolished Ricky's act, upstaged every other performer, including John Wayne, Richard Widmark, William Holden and even Orson Welles, and got exactly what she and the television audience wanted: Lucy the star, performing off-key, crazy, perfectly executed vaudeville turns, physical comedy as few women (particularly beautiful ones, former Goldwyn girls) have ever done.

The typical movement of this series involves Lucy performing for us, at home, the role that the narrative forbids her. She can never be a "real" public performer, except for us: she must narratively remain a housewife. In the episode entitled "The Ballet," for example, Ricky needs a ballerina and a burlesque clown for his nightclub act; Lucy pleads with him to use her. Of course he refuses. Lucy trains as a ballet dancer in one of her characteristic performances: dressed in a frothy tutu, she eagerly and

maniacally imitates a dancer performing ballet movements which she then transforms through automatic, exaggerated repetition into a charleston. Whenever Lucy is confident that she has learned something new, no matter how difficult, she gets carried away. These are the great comic scenes, occurring after the narrative setup, pure performances during which the other characters show absolutely no reactions. This is the first "story" line, before the mid-program heart break: "curtains" as halves of a heart lovingly open/close, or frame and divide each episode. Then, the second: Lucy will now train to be a burlesque comic. Her baggy pants clown/teacher arrives at their apartment, pretends she's a man, tells his melodramatic tale of woe about Martha and betrayal; Lucy becomes involved, says the Pavlovian name, Martha, and is hit with a pig bladder, sprayed with seltzer water, and finally, gets a pie in the face. The scene ends with Lucy saying, "Next time, you're going to be the one with the kind face," in other words, the victim of the sketch. Then, as in all the episodes, this one more literally than most, the two stories are condensed in a final, onstage performance. At his nightclub, Ricky is romantically singing "Martha" in Spanish. Ethel calls Lucy to inform her that Ricky needs someone in his act. She dresses up as the burlesque clown (not the needed dancer), and steps onstage with her wrong props. When Ricky sings the refrain, the word "Martha" is now her Pavlovian cue: she beats the male ballet dancers with the bladder; squirts the female ballerina with seltzer water; and, in a conclusion which uses up all the previous set ups, slams a pie in the singing face of tuxedoed, romantic crooner, Ricky. (The Saudi Arabian government detected an element of subversion in this series and banned it because Lucy dominated her husband.) This episode, like so many others, is a rehearsal for a performance, involving, in the end, a comical, public upstaging of Ricky. We are simultaneously backstage and outfront in the audience, waiting for Lucy's performance and Ricky's stoic, albeit

frustrated, endurance; thus, expectation is not connnected to narrative, but to anticipation of the comic--a performative, or proairetic expectation.

An exemplary instance of Lucy's upstaging, or humiliation, of Ricky may be seen in the episode entitled "The Benefit," in which Ricky's attempts to be the comedian rather than the straight man are utterly foiled. In this episode Lucy, along with the audience, discovers that Ricky has re-edited their benefit duo, taking all the punchlines for himself. Fade. Onstage, in identical costumes of men's suits, straw hats and canes, Ricky and Lucy perform a soft-shoe sketch. Ricky stops, taps his cane, and waits for Lucy to be the "straight man." Of course, she won't. While singing "Under the Bamboo Tree" about marriage and happiness, Lucy, with the camera closeup as her loyal, mugging accomplice in the reaction shots, outrageously steals all of Ricky's lines, smirking and using every show biz, upstaging method in the book. Applause, exit, the heart, this time as a literal curtain, closes. Lucy gets the last word and the last laugh during this ironic "turn" on the lyrics of the romantic song. It is interesting to compare Ricky, would-be comedian forced by his partner/wife to be the straight man, to George, the "straight man" who always gets the final, controlling laugh. In another episode, Lucy tries to steal Ricky's Hollywood screen test by upstaging him with direct looks at the camera. Finally, they tie her to a couch, which doesn't stop her, and she pulls off Ricky's (as Don Juan's) pants.

That Ricky could be so constantly upstaged and so readily disobeyed is not insignificant, for with his Cuban accent, constantly mimicked by Lucy, he does not fully possess language, is not properly symbolic as is George, the joker or wielder of authoritatively funny speech. The program's reliance on physical rather than verbal comedy, with Lucy and Ethel as the lead performers, constitutes another exclusion of Ricky. Unlike George, Ricky is not given equal, let alone superior, time. He constantly leaves the story,

and his departure becomes the cue for comic mayhem and audience pleasure. Although he is "tall, dark, and handsome," not the usual slapstick type, his representation as the Latin lover/bandleader/crooner and slapstick foil for Lucy's pies in the face suggests that Lucy's resistance to patriarchy might be more palatable because mediated by a racism which views Ricky as inferior.

In "Vacation from Marriage," the underside of situation comedy's reiteration of the same is briefly revealed. Lucy, with Ethel in the kitchen, is talking about the boredom and routine of marriage. "It isn't funny, Ethel, it's tragic." The rest of this show and the series make marriage funny and adventurous. Week after week, the show keeps Lucy happily in her confined, domestic, sit-com place after a 23 minute, tour-de-force struggle to escape. That neither audiences nor critics noticed Lucy's feminist strain is curious, suggesting that comedy is a powerful and unexamined weapon of subjugation. In most of the programs' endings, the narrative policy was one of twofold containment: every week for seven years, she was wrong and duly apologetic; and while repeating discontent, her masquerades and escapades made Monday nights and marriage pleasurable. Allen, on the same network, unties legal language and the power polarities implicit in its command; Ball takes over a male's domain of physical comedy. Both unmake "meaning," overturn patriarchal assumptions, stealing the show in the process; yet neither escape confinement and the tolerance of kindly fathers. That's entertainment!: for women a massive yet benevolent containment.

III

As theorists of historiography have argued, discourses of "truth" and the "real" move through a cause-effect, narrative chronology to a resolute closure without gaps or discontinuities. There is something at stake in this strategy and it is related to power and authority. Narrative embodies a

political determinism in which women find a subordinate place. But narrative in situation comedy is only the merest overlay, perhaps an excuse. As George Burns said, "more plot than a variety show and not as much as a wrestling match." This implausible, sparse "situation" exemplifies--in its obsessive repetition of the domestic regime, of marital bliss as crazy "scenes" and competitive squabbles--a social plaint if not a politics.

Situation comedy, with "gaps" of performance and discontinuities, uses narrative, offhandedly. The hermeneutic code is not replete with expectation, in need of decipherment, ensnaring us, lying to us. Expectation of pleasurable performance, the workings of the comic and humour rather than narrative suspense, are currencies of audience exchange. Perhaps this system might slightly challenge "narrative's relation to a legal system";[10] certainly narrative is not viewed as sacred or authoritative anymore than husbands are; it is necessary but not equal to performance. In trying to determine how comedy works to contain women and how successfully it does so, theories of narrative will alone thus be of little help to us. It is necessary to turn to theories of the comic and humor as they intersect narrative.

I will hesistantly begin an inquiry into the consequences of Freud's assessment of the comic and humor when both subject and object are women. As is well known, in his study of jokes, particularly tendentious or obscene jokes, Freud assigns woman to the place of object between two male subjects. However, there must be a difference, perhaps an impossibility, when "woman" becomes the joke-teller. Also, given that the process between spectator/auditor and joker is, according to Freud, a mutually timed, momentary slippage into the unconscious, one wonders what occurs when that "unconscious" is labeled "female"--without essentialist or biological simplifications, but with historical and cultural difference in mind. Yet, while the "joke" comprises the majority of Freud's study, and while the joke,

for Freud, is a more complicated process than the comic, its structure is not applicable to the structure of either of these television series (with the crucial exception of the role of George Burns, for whom Freudian joke analysis works perfectly), possibly because the joke is such a strong male preserve.

Unlike the three-way dealings of jokes, the comic, for Freud, is a two-way process, is not gender-defined, and derives from the relations of human beings "to the often over-powerful external world."[11] We experience a pleasurable empathy with the person who is pitted against this harsh world, whereas if we were actually in the situation, "we should be conscious only of distressing feelings."[12] We laugh at Lucy's comic moments, yet I wonder whether women might not also have experienced a certain amount of distress, particularly given the constraints of the 1950's and the constant subtle and not-so-subtle attempts to confine women to the home. Freud notes, "Persons become comic as a result of human dependence on external events, particularly on social factors."[13] Lucy is caught in her economic subservience to Ricky, as well as in the social mores of the fifties, a decade which covertly tried to reduce women to the status of dependent children. Lucy and Gracie are continually referred to as children; the women are "helpless" or economically dependent on males--particularly Lucy and Ethel, who do not have jobs as Gracie does. Thus it is interesting to note that what Freud calls the "comic of situation is mostly based on embarassments in which we rediscover the child's helplessness"[14] (one thinks perhaps of Lucy's exaggerated crying when she is frustrated or thwarted in her desires). Moreover, just as one rediscovers the helplessness of children in the comic of situation, so too, the pleasure that it affords is compared by Freud to a child's pleasure in repetition of the same story. Situation comedy endlessly repeats mise-en-scene, character, and story; this pleasure, like the pleasure derived from most television, must depend to a degree on weekly forgetting as well as

repetition of the intimately familiar. Freud concludes his meandering thoughts on the comic and its infantile sources, "I am unable to decide whether degradation to being a child is only a special case of comic degradation, or whether everything comic is based fundamentally on degradation to being a child."[15] "Degradation" is the crucial word here. Featuring the perennially disobedient and rebelliously inventive child, "I Love Lucy" hovers somewhere between the comic of situation and what Freud calls the "comic of movement"; or better, the "situation" (the external world) is the problem which necessitates the comic of movement of which Lucy is the master.

An appendage ten pages before the end of Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, and a later, brief essay by Freud entitled "Humour," are especially interesting for our purposes. Freud's analysis of "humor"--epitomized by "gallows jokes," the clever, exalted diversions of condemmed victims just before the hanging--as a category distinct from either the joke or the comic better explains the female victim (both subject and object, both performer and spectator), her place in the internal and external conditions of Lucy's production. Endlessly repeating that she wanted to work, to perform, humor for Lucy was "a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere[d] with it." It acted precisely "as a substitute" for these affects.[16] Humor was "a substitute" produced "at the cost of anger--instead of getting angry.[17] As observes Freud "The person who is the victim of the injury, pain . . . might obtain humourous pleasure, while the unconcerned person laughs from comic pleasure."[18] Perhaps, in relation to husband and wife sketches, and audiences, the sexes split right down the middle, alternating comic with humorous pleasure depending on one's view of who the victim is; this invocation of different pleasures suggests a complexity of shifting identifications amidst gendered, historical audiences.

Trying to revive Lucy for feminism, I have suggested that throughout the

overall series and the narrative structure of each episode, she is the victim--confined to domesticity and outward compliance with patriarchy. Yet, this series is complex; Ricky is often the immediate victim of Lucy, a role more easily accepted due to his Cuban rather than Anglo-Saxon heritage. Given this perhaps crucial qualification, Lucy is, finally, rebelliously incarcerated within situation comedy's domestic regime and mise-en-scene, acutely frustrated, trying to escape via the "comic of movement," while cheerfully cracking jokes along the way to her own unmasking or capture.

Importantly, humorous pleasure, for Freud, comes from "an economy in expenditure upon feeling" rather than the lifting of inhibitions that is the source of pleasure in jokes--not a slight distinction. Unlike the supposedly "liberating" function of jokes, humourous pleasure "saves" feeling because the reality of the situation is too painful. As Lucy poignantly declared to Ethel: "It's not funny, Ethel. It's tragic." Or as Freud states: "the situation is dominated by the emotion that is to be avoided, which is of an unpleasurable character." In "I Love Lucy," the avoided emotion, "submitted to the control of humour,"[19] is anger at the weekly frustration of Lucy's desire to escape the confinement of domesticity. This desire was caricatured by her unrealistic dreams of instant stardom in the face of her narrative lack of talent: her wretched, off-key singing, her mugging facial exaggerations, and out-of-step dancing. Lack of talent is paradoxically both the source of the audience's pleasure and the narrative necessity for housewifery. Using strategies of humorous displacement (the "highest of defensive processes," says Freud--a phrase that takes on interesting connotations in light of 1950s containment policies) and of the comic, both of which are "impossible under the glare of conscious attention,"[20] situation comedy avoids the unpleasant effects of its own situations. The situation of Lucy was replicated by the female spectator--whether working as a wife or in another "job"--moving

between comic and humorous pleasure, from spectator to victim, in tandem with Lucy.

In this later essay, Freud elevates humor to a noble, heroic status. He writes "[Humour] is fine . . . elevating . . . the triumph of narcissism, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt . . . or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure. Humour is not resigned, it is rebellious. It signifies the triumph of not only the ego but the pleasure principle . . . it [repudiates] the possibility of suffering . . . all without quitting the ground of mental sanity . . . it is a rare and precious gift."[21] For Lucy, Gracie, and audiences, humor was "a rare and precious gift." Given the repressive conditions of the 1950s, humor might have been women's weapon and tactic of survival, ensuring sanity, the triumph of the ego, and pleasure; after all, Gracie and Lucy were narcissistically rebellious, refusing "to be hurt." On the other hand, comedy replaced anger, if not rage, with pleasure. The double bind of the female spectator, and of the female performer, is replicated by the structure of the programs--the shifts between narrative and comic spectacle, the latter being contained by the resolute closure of the former--and the response of the spectator split between comic and humorous pleasure, between denial of emotion by humor and the sheer pleasure of laughter provided by the comic of movement and situation of Lucy's performances. Whether heroic or not, this pleasure/provoking cover-up/acknowledgement is not a laughing but a complex matter posing the difficult problems of women's simulated liberation through comic containment.

Notes

1. Eric Goldman, The Crucial Decade and After: America, 1945-1960 (New York: Vintage Books, 1956, 1960).

2. Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media," For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, Mo: Telos, 1981), p. 184.

3. The transcription was taken from tape.

4. See my "Jokes and Their Relation to the Marx Brothers," Cinema and Language, ed. Stephen Heath and Patricia Mellencamp (Maryland: University Publications of America, 1983), for further explication of jokes and the comic within the whacky male world of the Marx brothers.

5. Roland Barthes, "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers," Image-Music-Text, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), pp. 205-06.

6. Samuel Weber, The Legend of Freud (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), p. 114.

7. Weber, p. 114.

8. Weber, p. 116.

9. Bart Andrews, Lucy & Ricky & Fred & Ethel (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976). This book contains a synopsis of shows by air date and title which helped me organize my textual analysis.

10. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," Critical Inquiry, Vol. 7 #1 (1980), p. 10.

11. Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton & Co., 1960), p. 196.

12. Freud, p. 197.

13. Freud, p. 199.

14. Freud, p. 226.

15. Freud, p. 227.

16. Freud, p. 228.

17. Freud, p. 231.

18. Freud, p. 228.

19. Freud, p. 235.

20. Freud, p. 233.

21. Sigmund Freud, "Humour," The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol xxi (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), pp. 162-63.